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"Identity Crisis"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Selected verses about Christian identity

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I'd like to begin with a video today that helps us answer one of life's big questions...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsDQEb-qlyM>

Who am I? If we're honest, we all have to admit that we've asked ourselves that question at one time or another in our life. We've all thought about our identity in this world. And that's what I want to talk about today – our "true identity." I don't mean our physical identities, or vocational identities, or even the identity theft we all hear about when it comes to our financial records and how we have to guard against that. I mean our identity as Christians. Because somehow, I think our Christian identity is also in danger of being stolen from us as well. You know, two thousand years ago it was a dangerous political act to proclaim, "Jesus Christ is Lord." Because if Jesus Christ was Lord, that meant Caesar was not, and you could be persecuted or even killed. It was a counter cultural act to identify yourself as a follower of Christ. And unfortunately, today it's still a counter cultural act to identify yourself as a follower of Christ. Now we may not be physically persecuted, but in our politically correct and polarized culture we've allowed the name of Jesus to be co-opted and our faith has been undermined in so many ways. So I want to pose this question for you to think about: Isn't it time to reclaim our identity as Christians?

Let me share two examples about why identity is important. The first is a story I heard at a seminar a few years ago. Martin Luther King, Jr. graduated from Morehouse College in Georgia in 1948. In 1961, he was asked by the president of Morehouse to teach a course in philosophy. It's the first and only time King ever taught a class. And only eight students signed up for his course – five men and three women. There they were, as Dr. King gave each of them a syllabus, commented on their assignments, graded their papers and examinations, had discussions and debates. These eight students interacted with Dr. King for an entire semester. Yet not one of them ever took a picture, or saved any of the papers from his class marked with his comments, or kept a journal or any evidence of the time they spent with him. Not to attach a monetary worth on any of this, but just the value of his signature on any piece of paper starts at about ten thousand dollars today. What's interesting is that as King gained notoriety during the civil rights movement in the 60s, these students eventually understood that they had been in the shadow of greatness, and that they were part of a historical movement that ensured their identity as black Americans, with equality and voice in this country. And, they saw firsthand the unwavering courage and resolve it takes to insure your identity is never taken away. Think about that.

For the first time since Abraham Lincoln, they reclaimed who they were as a people. And still, some fifty plus years, later, those students continue to meet regularly to give tribute to King, and to proclaim their identity.

Let me give you another example of the importance of identity and the courage and resolve it takes to hold onto it. Can anyone tell me how many people live on this planet earth? Approximately 7.6 billion people. Can anyone tell me how many people live in the United States? About 326 million people. Can anyone tell me how many people live in the six New England states of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine? About, 14.5 million. And finally, can anyone tell me how many Jews there are in the entire world? The same – about 14.5 million. That's all! Of course there would be more, but six million of them were exterminated 75 years ago. Now consider that they comprise an infinitesimally small minority, only one half of one percent of the entire world's population. And yet look at all their accomplishments. Almost fifty percent of all the Nobel prizes have been won by Jews, fifty-one percent of Pulitzer Prize awards, fifty-four percent of world chess champions. They've played a major role in creating America's garment industry, movie industry, banking industry, and high tech industry. They seem to excel in every area they touch...art, literature, education, business, science, you name it. They were given a desolate piece of land back in 1945, and have subsequently turned that bit of land into one of the most fertile, influential and powerful nations on earth. I have even heard it argued that this tiny minority of the world's population, who have a history of being persecuted, oppressed and displaced, has been responsible for the biggest bulk of human creativity, imagination, progress, and forward thinking.¹ And even more importantly they have given the world the foundation for a moral and ethical society. You shall love the Lord God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. You shall not kill, you shall not covet, you shall not bear false witness, you shall remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

So what's their secret? Well, maybe there's something to say about being God's chosen people. But in truth, various studies have come up with this same conclusion. It's simply – the Jewish people have an identity. They make it a point to remember and uphold those things that have shaped them and made them a people. Every year, for thousands of years, the Jewish people have made a point of observing and honoring their holy days. Those days that make them Jews. Some of the highest and holiest moments in Jewish life are in the home, around the table, presided over by the elder... and the children

¹ Preaching as a Participation Art, Len Sweet

are not excused, rather they are required to attend and take part. And time and time again, year after year, they tell the stories of the Bible... of Abraham, of Moses, of Jacob, of David and more...of slavery, of persecution, displacement, oppression, treachery, suffering, sin, repentance, of survival, of purpose, making the connection between then and now. And it's a must that Jewish children be encouraged to interrogate and question and doubt and discuss, until those stories ultimately become a part of their life stories too. So that by their teenage years, at their Bar Mitzvah's and Bat Mitzvah's, Jewish children are shaped by their history and they know their identity as God's chosen people. In contrast, with our "progressive way of parenting," we do very little or none of that. Instead, we think it's a good idea to let our children "find themselves," find their own identity, in whatever ways they can. We encourage that. The problem is, they don't know who they are, so in essence, we allow our children to be shaped by others - by a consumer culture, a celebrity culture, a gaming culture, a sex culture, with actors, singers and athletes as their role models. And I think we're all too well aware as to where that leads, aren't we?²

Author and theologian Fredrick Buechner says there are only two stories in life. THE story, capital T-H-E, and your story. Let me ask, does your story identify with THE story? As the video said today, "How I identify myself determines how I approach life." That's why today, I'm encouraging all of us to reclaim our Christian identity. We who wear the name of Christ. We who are God's masterpiece, who are loved, accepted, chosen, made complete. We who are called to be countercultural, courageous, resolute. Because it does take courage to pray at a table out in public. It does take perseverance to attend worship regularly. It does take resolve to give up your time to attend a study. It does take commitment to pray daily. It does take sacrifice - great sacrifice to serve. But then you will never again have to ask the question, "who am I?" Because as Rev. Peter Gomes says, "When we're asked the question, "Who am I," the true Christian says, 'I am a follower of Jesus Christ. The purpose of my life is the purpose and praise of God. I am somebody of worth because I am made in the image of God who makes nothing bad. I am merciful. I am meek. I hunger for righteousness. I am pure in heart. I am a peacemaker. I am the salt of the earth. I am a light to the world. I bear good fruit. I turn the other cheek. I love my neighbor as myself. I am the human expression of the Divine hope. I am God's best and last chance in the world.' Yes, you are the means for hope and for love in the world. That is who you are. That is your identity. Now go and claim it, because Jesus Christ is Lord!" Can I hear you say it... Jesus Christ is Lord! Amen!

² Ibid